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Office of Special Investigations

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The Honorable Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Government Reform
House of Representatives

The Honorable Rod R. Blagojevich
House of Representatives

Subject: Weaponry: .50 Caliber Rifle Crime

As requested, enclosed with this letter is a copy of a briefing that OSI gave to representatives of the House Committee on Government Reform on July 15, 1999. At that time, we briefed those present on the results of our review concerning how .50 caliber semiautomatic rifles have been used in domestic and international criminal activity. Based on Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms tracing information and information OSI developed, we found that .50 caliber semiautomatic rifles are linked to potential assassins, terrorist groups, drug dealers, international drug cartels, militia groups, and a religious cult.

We will make copies of this letter available to others on request. If you have any questions, please contact Assistant Director Ron Malfi at (202) 512-6722.

Robert H. Hast
Acting Assistant Comptroller General
for Special Investigations

Enclosure

167586

GAO/OSI-99-15R .50 Caliber Rifle Crime

ATF Firearms Tracing Information

ATF routinely conducts gun traces for law enforcement agencies. The fact that a trace has been conducted does not necessarily mean that the firearm was involved in criminal activity.

ATF provided OSI with a list of 30 firearm trace requests generated between November 1992 and March 1999 concerning .50 caliber rifles. However, 2 of the requests were duplicates, leaving 28 separate weapons on which traces were conducted. All of the traces involved Barrett .50 caliber rifles, of which 27 were the semiautomatic model 82A1. One trace request appeared to involve a Barrett model 90, but efforts to develop additional information on this trace were unsuccessful.

Of the 27 traces involving Barrett semiautomatic model 82A1 rifles, we found that 18 were associated with criminal activity and 3 were not associated with criminal activity. No determination could be made regarding 6 traces.

In some cases, we found that although the criminal activity involved more than one .50 caliber semiautomatic rifle, the law enforcement agency had initiated a trace on only one firearm.

We also developed information on two criminal cases involving .50 caliber semiautomatic rifles not reported in the ATF tracing information. The Barrett model 82A1 was the weapon identified in both cases.

Examples of Possible Criminal Use of .50 Caliber Semiautomatic Rifles

The following pending cases were identified:

- **Alleged Castro Assassination Plot** – The U.S. Attorney in San Juan, Puerto Rico, is prosecuting seven Cuban-Americans who have been charged in a plot to assassinate Cuban President Fidel Castro during a 1997 visit to Margarita, an island off the coast of Venezuela. Two .50 caliber semiautomatic rifles seized from the defendants were to be used during the assassination.
- **Terrorist Organizations and Drug Cartels Acquiring .50 Caliber Semiautomatic Rifles** – Investigations are currently being conducted by federal law enforcement agencies involving the smuggling of .50 caliber semiautomatic rifles—purchased legally in the United States—to overseas locations by terrorist groups. Another investigation is targeting the movement of .50 caliber semiautomatic rifles from the United States to Mexico for use by drug cartels.
- **Illegal Alien Stockpiling Weapons** – In a case in Nevada, an illegal alien amassed a large quantity of weapons, including two .50 caliber semiautomatic rifles. The weapons were recovered following the execution of a search warrant.

The following closed cases were identified:

- **Religious Cult** – In 1989, two members of a church, described by ATF as a doomsday religious cult, were arrested and charged with federal firearms violations. The church followers had built underground bunkers in Gardner, Montana, to await the end of the world. The two suspects had used false

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